Oakland Oregon

April 12th 1875

Hon S F Chadwick

Secretary of State.

Salem Ogn.

Dear Sir

I have sold my Modoc War Claim to Abraham & Bro of Oakland Ogn for a valuable Consideration You will therefore have the Bond for the same Issued in the name of Abraham & Bro and send the said Bond to them and this shall be your receipt for the same

Witness

J L Smith

Respectfully Yours

W J Woodson

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A Modoc War Claim Transfer, Witnessed by J. L. Smith, 1875

Reflections

Jeffrey Hunt
September 17 2025

This letter, dated April 12, 1875, is addressed to Oregon Secretary of State Stephen F. Chadwick, who would later serve as the state's fifth governor. It authorizes the transfer of a Modoc War claim from W. J. Woodson to Abraham & Bro of Oakland, Oregon. The letter is witnessed by John Lewis Smith — my great-great-grandfather — whose sister Jane Ann Smith was married to Chadwick.

The document surfaced unexpectedly, having fallen out of a pre-1940 stamp album from my family collection. The album likely belonged to my father's side, while John Lewis Smith is from my mother's line. Its survival in such excellent condition, detached from any known chain of custody, adds to the mystery of how it wound its way into my possession.

The connections radiating from this single page are striking. John's brother James Beale Smith (1839–1879), married to Mary Anna Hall of another early Oregon pioneer family, ran a hardware store in Oakland; Abraham & Bro, the recipient of the claim, operated a general merchandise business in the same town. These stores would have been both competitors and collaborators in a frontier economy built on supplies, tools, and trade. John Lewis Smith is also reported to have had a role in the ownership of Fort Umpqua, though records are not entirely clear on whether this was the earlier Hudson's Bay Company post near Elkton or the later U.S. military site near the coast.

The letter reveals a web of local commerce and politics in 1870s Oregon. Woodson, the seller of the claim, may have been a business associate of Smith. Abraham & Bro were wealthy enough to purchase war claims outright, consolidating assets through Oakland's trading hub. Chadwick, as Secretary of State, was the official channel through which such claims became bonds. And there, standing between them, is John Lewis Smith, quietly witnessing the transaction.

In its way, this letter embodies the intertwining of personal, political, and economic history: a frontier war echoing in state compensation bonds; local merchants seizing opportunities; and family ties binding together the early civic and commercial fabric of Oregon. For me, it is also a reminder of the serendipity of history — how a fragile slip of paper, tucked away in an old stamp album, can unexpectedly connect generations and illuminate the hidden intersections of family and state.